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THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
HENRY A. KISSINGER
SECRETARY OF STATE

THE INTERNATIONAL HOTEL

9:20 A.M. PDT

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Ladies and gentlemen, I just want to bring you up to date on the discussions that have been taking place.

The President, General Weyand and I met for about an hour and one half this morning. General Weyand gave us a report about the military situation in South Vietnam, as he sees it, and some of the options which he believes should be considered.

The President invited General Weyand to return this afternoon, and on that occasion he will bring along with him two intelligence experts, as well as the Defense Department expert who has been handling military supplies.

We will then go into the question of the political situation and the long-term supply situation in detail.

The President has also ordered an NSC meeting for probably Tuesday afternoon. It could slip until Wednesday morning, to permit General Weyand and his team to report to the entire NSC.

In the meantime, he has ordered that the NSC staff, in close cooperation with the other agencies, develop for their NSC meeting a statement of the various options before us.

These are the procedures that are going to be followed. I make these points in order to indicate that we are at the very early stages of considering the report of General Weyand. No decisions will be taken while the President is in Palm Springs.

Rather, we will use this opportunity for the fullest possible briefing of the President, and then the staffs in Washington are going to analyze the reports, prepare the options and then the entire NSC will consider the matter.

I might also point out that we are considering releasing the report of General Weyand, after the President has had an opportunity to study it with just some minor deletions by the middle of the week so the public can have the general appreciation. This is where we stand, and I will be glad to answer questions.

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Q Mr. Secretary, considering the enormous amount of military equipment that has been lost in South Vietnam by the deterioration of the South Vietnamese Army, do you see any conceivable way that you can justify sending additional military equipment to South Vietnam until at least the South Vietnamese Army shows it can stand and hold its own territory?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: The determination that has to be made is with respect to the military capacity of the South Vietnamese Army to defend the remaining territories. We have received another detailed analysis from General Weyand as to some estimates of what would be required to effect this.

The loss of territory in the North -- I think it is important to understand what the military situation was. In flagrant violation of Article 7 of the Paris accords, the North Vietnamese have introduced almost their entire army into South Vietnam so that there are 18 North Vietnamese divisions in South Vietnam at this moment leaving only two or three divisions in North Vietnam and this is in flagrant, total violation of solemn agreements which were endorsed by the international community.

That created an unbalanced military situation in the North in which whatever the South Vietnamese did it would be wrong. If they stood, they were going to be defeated piecemeal. If they retreated, they ran the risk of disintegration of the units that were retreating which is in fact what happened.

But one of the aspects of our examination is, of course, what the military situation is and what degree of American help can be significant.

Q Mr. Secretary, can the South Vietnamese Army defend the remaining territory and what are the requirements of their army now to defend that territory?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: As I pointed out, this is, of course, one of the issues that has to be looked at. There is a possibility for the South Vietnamese military forces to stabilize the situation. The next question is for what length of time and against what level of attack.

Then, there is also the moral question for the United States, whether when an ally with which it has been associated for ten years wishes to defend itself, whether it is the United States that should make the decision for it by withholding supplies, that it should no longer defend itself. These are all questions that are involved in the examination that is now going on.

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Q Mr. Secretary, General Thieu seems to have adopted some of the Administration's language in explaining about why he retreated; namely, that the U.S. failed to supply him with aid. In fact, he said it would be an act of betrayal if we continued to fail to supply aid.

Now, how is that going to help your problems with the U.S. Congress?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I think, Mr. Lisagor, that one of the most important things that all of us can do--the Administration, Congress, and if I may say so, the press as well-- is to recognize that we are facing a great human tragedy and that we don't try to gloat over arguments that may have been made or to try to pick on things that men, who obviously are in despair, now may be saying.

There are certain facts in the situation which may be difficult and unpleasant, but which are, nevertheless, true. It is a fact that the aid levels to Vietnam were cut by a third the first year and by another 50 percent the following year.

This coincided with a worldwide inflation, and a fourfold increase in fuel prices, so that a situation was created for a variety of reasons, in which almost all of the American military aid had to be given for ammunition and for fuel, very little for spare parts, and none for new equipment.

Even the ammunition had to be rationed, according to General Weyand, and so that individual guns could, for example, fire only two rounds a day. To what extent did such a situation contribute to the demoralization of the Army, and to what extent the certainty, as they were looking at the situation of constantly declining aid levels, produced a decision to withdraw, which in turn produced a panic, I think is fairly evident.

This is far from saying this was the intention of those who cut the aid, and I think it is safe to say that you can tell from the public statements that senior Administration officials made, that there was no expectation of a massive North Vietnamese attack this year.

So, there were a number of factors involved here, and I think there is some merit in what General Thieu is saying now. I think some of the adjectives he used are those of a desperate man who is in great anguish and I think it is also fair to say that the United States, for ten years, put in a great deal of its efforts and of its blood and of its treasure, and that, too, should weigh in the scale and that we made a very great effort through a long period of time. So, we have to evaluate it over an extended period of time.

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Q Could I just follow that a moment? We keep talking about a massive North Vietnamese invasion and many of us have been led to believe that this was a case of withdrawal by General Thieu. The President commented on that in San Diego saying it was a poorly planned and unnecessary affair.

Would you be more precise about what happened?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: To the best of our understanding, what happened was the following: In December, the North Vietnamese plan was to continue an intensified version of the operations of last year. That is to say, to pick off outlying district towns and perhaps to attack one or two provincial capitals.

In January, for a variety of reasons, the North Vietnamese decided to make a larger attack and they concentrated on the province of Phuoc Long, in total violation of the Paris accords. When they succeeded in that operation without significant opposition from the South Vietnamese government, which felt itself overextended and without any military reaction or even military moves by the United States, they decided to make an all out attack this year.

From the middle of January on, a massive infiltration of North Vietnamese divisions started. President Thieu, at that point, was faced with a situation -- also President Thieu found out during the battle of Ban Me Thuot which followed the battle of Phuoc Long, of his fleet of C-130s, only six were flyable because of the absence of spare parts so that his strategic mobility had been substantially reduced.

As he saw the North Vietnamese build up, and as he saw the prospects of American aid, in any case declining, whatever the decision of the Congress would be -- I think it was a reasonable assumption that the level of aid would be declining -- he made the strategic decision of consolidating his forces this year, depriving the North Vietnamese of the momentum of this campaign season, use his supplies up in the battles next year, and hope for new appropriations in 1977. This was his strategic assessment.

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In terms of a strategic assessment, it made a lot of sense. The trouble was that in executing it, it was not planned with sufficient care, with sufficient understanding of the logistic system of South Vietnam, and it was compounded by the fact that the South Vietnamese divisions have their dependents living with them so that when a South Vietnamese division moved, all of their dependents moved with them, which, in turn, triggered a mass exodus of refugees, immobilizing these armies and at some point along this retreat, that turned into a panic where the soldiers were trying to take care of their families.

So, the decision was triggered by a correct evaluation of his prospects, the prospects being that if he kept his units strung out, they would probably be defeated by this massive North Vietnamese invasion and to try to get to a more consolidated line, in executing what was probably a correct strategic decision, he, of course, brought about consequences with which we are familiar, which are tragic. I am just trying to explain our best understanding of what happened.

Q Mr. Secretary, the United States has spent about \$140 to \$150 billion in South Vietnam. What is it that makes the Administration think that \$300 million or even an amount somewhat larger than that would do any good? What is it that makes you think additional money is ever going to be able to make the South Vietnamese Army fight or solve the situation, when you spend \$140 to \$150 billion and you are in the situation you are in now?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: First of all, as I pointed out, this whole situation is going to be reviewed by the National Security Council on Tuesday, and I do not want to prejudge all of these decisions.

There is, however, also involved a question of the obligations a country has that for ten years has fought somewhere, which has encouraged millions of people to associate themselves with the United States, and whether it should then refuse to let them defend themselves if they want to defend themselves.

This is one argument on the military side. On the humanitarian side, I think it is important and decisive that the United States has an obligation to the hundreds of thousands who were closely associated with it and must make a maximum effort on the level of refugees and otherwise.

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Q I am not talking about the humanitarian side, Mr. Secretary. I am asking, in effect, whether \$140 to \$150 billion is not as much moral obligation as the United States can undertake?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: That is the decision that will have to be made by first the President and then the Congress.

Q Mr. Secretary, would you anticipate that the President would make these decisions in time to tell us about them in the so-called State of the World address Thursday?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I have not had an opportunity to discuss with the President in great detail what he intends to say in this address. My impression is he will deal with the immediate foreign policy situation that he feels the United States is confronting, and I would think it is extremely probable that he would put before the Congress on that occasion at least some preliminary ideas of at least some immediate measures that in his judgment have to be taken.

Q Dr. Kissinger, the New York Times has a report from Paris this morning that the French government has initiated plans to implement the Paris peace accords and to reach a settlement on that basis. Also, that the French are going to be active in all of Vietnam in humanitarian and refugee work.

Do you have any comment on that? Have you been informed of this, and, what is the outlook of this taking place?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We would gratefully welcome any attempt by any nation, including France, to participate in the humanitarian effort. Secondly, we have attempted to encourage all of the signatories of the Paris accords to bring about their implementation and therefore, if France is attempting to bring about an implementation of the Paris accords, we would certainly look at their proposals with sympathy.

We have not received an official French proposal and, indeed, I was not aware of this particular report, but the United States strongly favors the implementation of the Paris accords, which have been grossly and outrageously violated by Hanoi, and it would support the efforts of any country that would attempt to bring about an implementation of those accords.

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Q Mr. Secretary, we have heard around here that this is not our war. We have also seen some pretty pessimistic reports from everywhere that the ball game is over. And also, you seem to neglect the area while you are concentrating on the Middle East. What do you have to say for that? Do you think Southeast Asia is still as viable as you thought it was two years ago?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: First of all, my trip to the Middle East to deal with the question that I was dealing with, other problems, had been scheduled for many months and when I left on the trip to the Middle East, we had a crisis in Cambodia, the nature of which was well understood and which really required a Congressional decision. It did not require decisions by the Administration.

We did not expect an imminent crisis in Vietnam, and you remember that the Secretary of Defense stated a view which, all of us shared, that the attacks this year would not be of a critical nature, so that the disintegration of the situation in the Northern half of Vietnam was quite unexpected to us in the sense that we were not told in advance of the decision to evacuate.

It really did not reach the proportions it has until after my return from the Middle East. There is no question that South Vietnam faces an extremely grave situation. There are 18 North Vietnamese divisions in South Vietnam in blatant violation of the Paris accords, and there is no agreement in history that is self-enforcing.

If the signatories of the agreement cannot enforce it, either by actions of their own or by aid to the aggrieved parties, then a difficult situation is inevitable.

Under the Paris accords, North Vietnam was not permitted to infiltrate or to add any additional forces to those it already had in South Vietnam. At that time, it had something like 80,000 to 100,000 people in South Vietnam. Today, it has closer to 400,000 in South Vietnam.

Under the Paris accords, North Vietnam was not permitted to introduce new equipment except through ICCS checkpoints and in replacement on a one-to-one basis for equipment that had been lost, damaged and destroyed.

The North Vietnamese never even permitted the establishment of these checkpoints and totally disregarded the agreement. This is what brought about the change in the military situation which was compounded by the fact that the South Vietnamese Army inventories were running down while the North Vietnamese inventories were increasing. This is the objective structure of what happened in the last two years.

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Q Mr. Secretary, has the Administration any indication from the Democratic leadership of Congress that Congress will be any more receptive to providing more military aid now than they were before they went into recess?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: As you know, the Congress is in recess right now and I am confident that the President is going to be in touch with the Congressional leadership.

He has not had an opportunity, to the best of my knowledge, to be in touch with the Congressional leadership, but again, let me make one point: It is unavoidable that when one analyzes the causes of a situation, that it may be taken as a criticism of this or that group.

I think, in the history of Vietnam, there is enough criticism to go around. There have been mistakes made by the Executive Branch and there have been misjudgments made by the legislative.

I think the major requirement for the United States, recognizing that we will now have a difficult set of decision, and a difficult set of debates, is to come out of this with dignity and without adding to the bitterness and viciousness which has so drained us over the years.

We will try to do our best to contribute to this. Whether we will always succeed, I don't know.

Q Mr. Secretary, you said at your last press conference in some very strong language, that the problem was that this was now a question of what kind of people we are and whether or not we will destroy deliberately an ally.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: That is right.

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Q The scenario that you gave us today indicates that while that \$300 million would have been needed, there was a proper, comprehensible decision to make, yet it was poorly executed, and that is why we have the problem. Your scenario does not really seem to back up the question of laying the blame.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Wait just a minute. It is not just a question of \$300 million. It is a question that since 1973, the combination of declining aid levels, inflation and rising fuel prices has led to a constant attrition of the South Vietnamese Army.

It is not just a decision of this Congress to delay \$300 million. It is a process that has been going on for a period of two years.

The statement I made in the press conference, which was under slightly different military conditions, at least as they were then perceived in Washington, was in terms of those decisions, but nevertheless, it is a very important moral question for the United States, whether when people who, with its encouragement, have fought for many years, should in their hour of extremity be told by the United States that while they want to continue fighting that the United States would no longer help them defend themselves against an enemy who has never been told by its allies that there is a limit beyond which they won't support them.

I maintain that is a question that we ought to ask ourselves as a people. Regardless of the probable outcome of the war, I think it is a serious question. It is not meant necessarily as a criticism of anybody, and I really believe that at this moment, having paid so much in our national unity on this issue, we should conduct this debate, not with an attitude of who is going to pin the blame on whom, but with an attitude that we are facing a great tragedy in which there is involved something of American credibility, something of American honor, something of how we are perceived by other people in the world, on which serious people may have different questions but in which, for God's sake, we ought to stop talking as if one side had the monopoly of wisdom, morality and insight and that serious people trying to deal with this problem are trying to run a confidence game. This is all that I am trying to suggest.

Q Mr. Secretary, if I may continue, my question really was getting toward, are you personally convinced that if we had voted that extra \$300 million that was requested for the emergency supplemental, or if we had actually appropriated the full amount requested in the beginning -- \$1.4 billion -- that we would not have faced the situation we now face, either at this time or sometime down the road?

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SECRETARY KISSINGER: I believe, personally, that it is not just the \$300 million. It is the \$300 million coming on top of a lot of other things. I believe that if it had not been for the moralities of Executive authority resulting from Watergate, if the aid levels had been appropriate over the years and if we had been freer to conduct foreign policy than was possible under these circumstances -- partly for reasons in which the Executive shares a responsibility -- I believe that certainly the difficulties we face this year could have been avoided for a number of years.

For how long, it is hard to say, but very often, if we look over the postwar period, a period of time gain gets a possibility of things developing. But I would add, moreover, that it would have made a lot of difference to us as a people, that if it happened, if it had more clearly happened as a result of actions, not so much under our control. But I would finally add, since you asked the question, and I did not volunteer this statement, that at some point in this discussion -- we now cannot avoid the discussion -- at some point in this discussion we ought to stop this inquiry and ask ourselves where we go from here.

Q Mr. Secretary, I have two questions. One is, you keep referring to the massive violations by the North Vietnamese, and in view of their record, I wonder why you thought at the time the agreements were negotiated, or at any other time, that they were going to abide by them?

We knew very early, as you said, they did not allow us to establish checkpoints.

My other question is, do you think there would be any benefit if the United States were able to provide some military aid now, through bombing or any other measure, to stem the tide of what is going on?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: The first thing I think the people ought to remember is the kind of national debate that was going on in the United States in 1971 and 1972. I think it is indisputable that there was overwhelming consensus developing that the United States should end its participation in the war.

And you may remember that before I went on my last negotiation, the Democratic caucus had already voted to set a terminal date to our participation in the war. That is January, 1973.

Let me point out this did not affect the actual terms of the negotiations which were substantially agreed to before that. So, I am simply trying to reconstruct the national mood which was that the American military participation in the war had to be ended.

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The major debate that then occurred was whether the United States should deliberately overthrow the government with which it was associated, and that we refused to do.

Now, that the North Vietnamese would press against the edges of the agreement was to be expected. What was not to be expected was, that partly through legislative action and partly through our internal divisions we would find ourselves in a position where a forceful diplomacy became extremely difficult, and this certainly accelerated the violations and made them substantially free.

So, we had no illusions that we were dealing with a country other than one that had violated every other agreement that it had made, but under the conditions in which the agreement was made of a strong period in American foreign policy, we believe that we would be able to exercise sufficient influence on the situation to keep the violations to manageable proportions, and also to obtain sufficient aid to permit the South Vietnamese to handle the problem.

So, those expectations, for reasons that no one could possibly predict at that time, were not fulfilled.

Q Mr. Secretary, a look at the future rather than the past. I have two questions. One, isn't it likely that if we provided the \$300 million at this point, the likelihood would be that it would only prolong the fighting, cost more lives, and end in the same result? Two, the President and General Weyand have said they think the situation is salvageable. I wonder what evidence you have to give any hope that it is salvageable?

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SECRETARY KISSINGER: The President will study all the recommendations of General Weyand, plus the judgment of all of his senior advisers over the next days, and I think it is for the President then to make the judgment and to state it in his press conference.

I would like also to point out that even if this situation should finally wind up in some negotiation, it is not a matter of indifference whether it is done in such a way that permits the maximum extraction of refugees and of those whose very lives are at stake in the present situation.

So, there are very many levels of objectives that can be set. There is a point of view, which we will be examining, that the situation can be stabilized by a combination of the shortened lines, infusion of American aid, and other measures.

That point of view, together with other points of view, will be considered over the next few days, and the President will report his conclusions to the Congress on Thursday.

My point in appearing here is to tell you primarily what the status of our discussion is at this moment and at this moment the President has really done nothing but spend about 90 percent of his time listening and asking questions to the purely military aspect of General Weyand's report.

He will get a further discussion of that this afternoon, together with the intelligence appraisal, and then this whole matter will be submitted to the National Security Council, so I do not want to pre-empt his decisions.

Q Mr. Secretary, it would seem time is of the essence, and with the events happening as quickly as they are over there, isn't time being wasted with the President being out here? Isn't this whole policy-making process being delayed because of the distances between here and Washington?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I am not going to answer that question. Isn't time being wasted?

Q Isn't time being wasted in the policy-making decision with NSC being all back in Washington, you are here, General Weyand is here, the President is here. Couldn't it be done faster if everything was concentrated back there. It seems the middle of the week is awfully late for something so important.

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SECRETARY KISSINGER: There are about \$175 million left in the pipeline in the current appropriations. We are expediting the shipment of that equipment to Vietnam. No matter what decision is made by the President, it could not take effect for a number of weeks.

Therefore, we believe in decisions of this importance, it is extremely crucial that there be a very careful and a very prayerful examination of all the choices before us, and there is no effective delay, no matter what decisions the President eventually decides.

Q Dr. Kissinger, could you answer the other part of that question about whether bombing is still an option and whether that would be of any assistance, help to the South Vietnamese?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: As you know, the introduction of American military forces in or over Vietnam is prohibited by specific legislation that was passed in July 1973, which was, I may say, another complicated factor in the enforcement of the agreement.

It is not so much a question of what we would have done. It is a question of what the other side knew we could not possibly do. Therefore, before any such action could be contemplated, the President would have to ask authority from the Congress to do that, and I do not anticipate that.

Q Mr. Secretary, one of the questions that is troubling many Americans and some people in this room, as you have already judged, is that what is happening in Vietnam today was foreseen by many people once the American troops withdrew.

My question is, why then must the Nation be asked to wear a hair shirt because of what has happened?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: The problem is not whether the Nation must be made to wear a hair shirt. The President is trying, to the best of his abilities, to make clear what he takes to be the causes of that situation.

We will never know whether it would have happened if enforcement had been carried out more aggressively and aid had been given more substantially. He is simply trying to point out his analysis of what brought about the present situation. After all, the people who predicted this could have been wrong. Maybe they could have been right. We do not know now.

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Q You do acknowledge that a great many people did predict it?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Oh, yes, and I am saying, of course, there were many people who made that argument, and that still does not change the question of whether the United States, having made all these investments, should not have carried out at least its moral obligations more fully.

Q Mr. Secretary, could you tell us what some of the options are that are being considered? We are not going to get a chance to talk to General Weyand, so we don't know what the suggestions are.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I really cannot properly go into it. Partly this is due to the fact that this morning General Weyand concentrated, I would say, exclusively on two things: His analysis of the reasons for the development of the military situation, and secondly, his analysis of the military prospects.

We have not yet covered the humanitarian problems, the evacuation problems of refugees, the possibilities that were alluded to of which we have no formal indication of restoration of the Paris accords.

So, all of these will have to be issues that will have to be examined in developing the options, but what we are planning is to go over that this afternoon, to sketch out some of the main options as we see them.

Then, the embassy staff, together with General Weyand, the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency will pull them together into a more comprehensive option paper, which will then be put before the National Security Council on Tuesday or, at the latest, Wednesday morning.

Q Mr. Secretary, the President spoke in his press conference of solemn commitments we had made to South Vietnam. This, I am sure you are aware, has raised many questions of secret agreements or tacit understandings or that kind of thing.

First of all, what solemn commitments was the President referring to? Was he referring only to the one-for-one replacement, which, as I understand it, was not a commitment but an option, and if he was not referring to that, what was he talking about?

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SECRETARY KISSINGER: As I have explained, I think, at a previous press conference, he was not talking of a legal commitment. He was talking of a moral commitment. I believe that the South Vietnamese had every reason to think that if they permitted American troops to withdraw and if they enabled us to retrieve our prisoners, that we would carry out what we had called the Vietnamization process in enabling them to defend themselves.

We did not give them any specific figures, and we did not give them any definite promises, except to indicate that obviously, having signed the Paris agreement, we would have an interest in its enforcement.

But, I believe that what the President was talking about was a moral obligation, not a legal commitment. He was talking about something growing out of a ten-year engagement of the United States ended by our withdrawal, not about secret clauses in particular documents.

There is no question that when we were negotiating the agreement we, ourselves, believed that the American debate had not concerned economic or military aid, and I think if you check the record, there was no debate on that subject at the time.

The American debate had concerned the question of whether enough Americans had died there and whether the South Vietnamese should not be able to defend themselves, and I believe, in all fairness, we all have to admit to ourselves, that we all believe that if the South Vietnamese would make the effort to defend themselves, there would be great receptivity in this country to help them do it as long as our prisoners could come back and Americans could stop dying there.

That was the assumption within which we were operating, and I think if you read the back files of newspapers and Congressional debates, that was the essence of our debate at the time.

Therefore, it was never put in the form of a legal commitment, and it is not that we are violating a legal commitment. It is the President's perception of the moral obligation growing out of the context of events.

I just want to say again, many of you have heard me brief on this subject now for six years, and I think none of you have ever heard me question the travail and concern of those who have opposed the war, and all we can ask is that those of you who have been critical, ought to keep in mind that there is a great human tragedy that those in the Administration are viewing, and they are trying to deal with it in the best interest of the United States and in the best interests of world peace.

Thank you.

END (AT 10:10 A.M. PDT)